

Spiral by K.L. Denman

Chapter 1

I wasn't always a cripple. There was a time when I was a regular girl, fifteen years old, going to school, hanging out with friends, playing soccer, doing whatever kids do. I had a boyfriend. I had a family. I got a job.

I got a job. Yeah, it was good. I wanted extra spending money, cash for new clothes and movies and makeup. Maybe save up enough to buy a car. My friends said I was lucky because I wasn't washing dishes or bagging groceries. I was a display assistant in a furniture store, and I helped set up little fake rooms. This was a major score because I totally wanted to be an interior decorator.

There was a catch. The catch was my boss, Ms. Trent, who couldn't crack a smile if her life depended on it. Or if my life depended on it. She snapped orders like an army sergeant. "C'mon, hustle. We haven't got all day. Move it, kid."

Kid. I wonder if she even knew my name. Couldn't she have said, "Move it, Abby"?

So that day, when Ms. Trent pointed at the ceiling and said, "Go up there and change that lightbulb and make it quick," I didn't argue. I got the ladder. I set it up against the shelving unit. I climbed to the top, and when I couldn't reach the light socket, I crawled onto the shelving. I knelt and still couldn't reach, so I crouched, stood, and everything started to sway.

And then I was falling. It was like being in one of those dreams where you're free-falling, and you want to scream but you have no breath. And don't you always wake up before you hit bottom? Someone once told me we do, because if we don't wake up, we die, right there in our sleep. I didn't die. But the only thing between me and the concrete floor was the metal shelving, the unit that collapsed. The one I shouldn't have been standing on. Falling backward onto that broke my back. So say the doctors.

The doctors say a lot of things. They say I'm lucky to be alive. They say I'm lucky the shelves didn't hit my spinal column higher up, at the neck. Then I'd be a quadriplegic instead of a paraplegic.

"Yeah, right," I say. "I'm just like that lost dog."

"I don't understand," the doctor replies. His brows gather into a knot.

"C'mon," I scoff. "There's me, lucky to get a job, lucky to be alive, lucky I'm not a quadriplegic. And then there's that poster. You know the one. Lost Dog. Three legs, blind in left eye, missing an ear, accidentally neutered. Answers to the name of Lucky." I stare at him.

He doesn't laugh. His brows smooth out and he sighs. "Listen, Abby. I know how hard this must be for you."

I'm the one who laughs. "Right. You know how it feels to be told you'll never walk again?"

"Sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have said it quite like that. How's your pain level? Do you need a shot?"

I turn away. This is what they do. They can't find the right words to say, and they wimp out, dope me up, shut me up. I know it's crazy to be angry with them, it's not their fault. But I can't seem to help it.

Fault. My parents are into that. They sat beside my bed and wept and held my hand and washed me and brushed my hair and positioned the vile bedpan and cried. Then one day, my dad went nuts.

"Stupid greedy piece of scum! She risks my daughter for a lightbulb? Sends you up a ladder onto her junk shelving? She has no safety rules in place, does she? It's all about the money, isn't it? Squeeze every scrap of time out of a body with no regard for proper training, no proper equipment! We are going to sue that miserable excuse for a human being. She's going to pay for this!"

He pauses to draw breath, and my mom puts a hand on his arm. Softly, she says, "I've already looked into that, dear."

His crazed stare slowly focuses on her. "You have?"

"Yes. We can't sue. Abby can get some compensation from the government plan for workers, but, the employer is protected."

Dad's eyes bulge outward. His jaw drops open. "The, the employer is protected?" His right hand forms a fist and it slams into his left palm. Smack. "Well," he says. "Well. We'll see about that."

The next day, he makes a huge sign and takes it to the furniture store. He walks up and down on the sidewalk in front of that store all day. And the next day. And the next. Mom tells me people stop and talk to him. It takes a while, but I finally get her to tell me what's written on his sign. It says Life-Changing Work.

I say, "Huh?"

Mom shakes her head. "He couldn't write anything that defames the store, or they'd be the ones suing him. This way people ask him questions. Then he tells them what happened to you."

"Oh."

"He even attracted some media. One of the tv stations wants to interview you, "

"What? No!"

"Don't worry. He refused."

Dad keeps at it for weeks. When he hears that Ms. Trent no longer works at the furniture store, he stops. He comes by for a visit and says, "I thought it might make it hurt less. But it doesn't."

None of us hurt less. There is only a weary, half-assed acceptance. And under that, under the heart that still beats in my chest, in that half of me with sensation, there is a boulder of anger. A massive, cold, heavy boulder of anger.